

The Good Hamas Member
June 14, 2015
Luke 10:25-37 (The Message)

Last week we started our series on Jesus' parables with one that is anything but well known: the Parable of the Leaven. Today we consider perhaps the best known of Jesus' many parables: The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Since many of you use the term "Good Samaritan" in your everyday vocabulary, I feel certain that you know the basics of the story. Rather than ask you to retell it now, I will read it from a contemporary paraphrase. Try to imagine Jesus standing before you and speaking these words from the tenth chapter of Luke:

Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. "Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?" He answered, "What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it?"

He said, "That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence - and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself." "

Good answer!" said Jesus. "Do it and you'll live." Looking for a loophole, he asked, "And just how would you define 'neighbor'?"

Jesus answered by telling a story. "There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead.

Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Levite religious man showed up; he also avoided the injured man.

"A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man's condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill - I'll pay you on my way back.'

"What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?" "The one who treated him kindly," the religion scholar responded.

Jesus said, "Go and do the same."

Our second reading is a modern take on Jesus' parable. It was written by Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar who teaches at Vanderbilt and whose new book on the parables inspired this sermon series.

Recognize that "Samaria today has various names: the West Bank, Occupied Palestine, Greater Israel."¹

I am an Israeli Jew on my way from Jerusalem to Jericho, and I am attacked by thieves, beaten, stripped, robbed, and left half dead in a ditch.

Two people who should have stopped to help pass me by: the first, a Jewish medic from the Israel Defense Forces; the second, a member of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. But the person who takes compassion on me and shows me mercy is a Palestinian Muslim whose sympathies lie with Hamas, a political party whose charter not only anticipates Israel's destruction, but also depicts Jews as subhuman demons responsible for all the world's problems.²

May God bless the reading and hearing of these wise words.

Let us pray . . . Storytelling God, help us to go beyond merely hearing stories by finding ourselves in them. Remind us that Jesus' parables call us to think and to act. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Jesus' parables should grab our attention! When I shared with one of you that my sermon title was "The Good Hamas Member" your response was "please don't put that on our sign. We don't want those driving by to think we support Hamas in any way, shape or form."

If the idea of a Good Hamas Member sounds like an oxymoron to your ears know that this is exactly what Jesus intends.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (HarperOne, 2014), p. 104.

² Ibid.

Today, you won't find Israeli Jews talking about a "Good Hamas Member." That's absurd! In the first century of the common era you would not find Israelites talking about a "Good Samaritan." That's ridiculous! Then like now there are no "good enemies" and no "good terrorists."

Except . . . perhaps this is possible in God's Empire. Jesus teaches about and begins to make real on earth an Empire that looks very different from the empires of his day or of our day.

So perhaps the first of many meanings we can find in this parable is the reminder that God's Empire, this reality we call the Realm of God or the Kingdom of God is capable of showing up when, where, and through whom you least expect it.³

You may be processing this as a new idea and as one that sounds so unconventional. It isn't the way we have usually interpreted the parable. Perhaps a television sitcom is a safer way to begin.

Do you remember Seinfeld? It was the best show ever that was about nothing. In the final episode – back at the end of the 1998 – the main characters end up receiving a one year prison sentence.⁴ Here is how that surprise ending came to be:

Jerry gets a call from NBC saying they want to go ahead with the original proposal (for his show). As a perk, they offer him the company jet to take him anywhere he likes and he, Elaine, George and Kramer are soon winging their way to Paris. They don't get very far when the plane has to make an emergency landing . . . and soon find themselves with a few hours to kill in a small town.⁵

As the four friends are wandering the sidewalks of that quaint New England town they observe a carjacking. Rather than get involved they watch from across the street. Kramer takes out his camcorder and starts recording while Elaine, George and Jerry joke about the weight of the man being carjacked. As city smart New Yorkers they know to keep their distance.

³ For example, see Alyce M. McKenzie. *The Parables for Today* (Westminster John Knox, 2007), p.52.

⁴ The Internet Movie Database. Seinfeld: Season 9, Episode 22 – "The Finale"
<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0697695/>>

⁵ Ibid.

Amazingly Jerry uses his cell phone to call NBC rather than 911. And then they are shocked when a police officer arrives and arrests them.⁶

Jerry tries to protest by claiming that they didn't do anything. The officer replies that that is exactly their offense as "the law requires you to help or assist anyone in danger as long as it's reasonable to do so" and then informs them it's a new law called "the Good Samaritan Law."⁷

This is the meaning we are used to and have come to expect. Our country is blanketed by jurisdictions with Good Samaritan Laws. Our churches are filled with reminders to love God by loving people – even the random people we meet when our paths cross. This type of ethical behavior can and has been used to justify a wide variety of helping endeavors.

As relatively well to do people – at least by global standards - we imagine ourselves taking on the role of the Samaritan in the story. We want to be the helper, but the original hearers would have identified with the injured person. Perhaps we should as well.

Perhaps you have been beaten, robbed, and left half-dead. If so, you certainly would have welcomed help from anyone.

The closest I have come is thankfully not very close at all. While I was in graduate school and was driving in a thunderstorm I found myself on an unfamiliar road that took a dip in an intersection – a dip I only found out about when my car got stuck in what I later learned was a flash flood.

As I sat there feeling sorry for myself God sent help in the form of a motorist in a car that was not as low to the ground as mine. That person was traveling in the opposite direction and approached the intersection slowly and began to proceed through it until the water also halted their progress. We both sat and waited. The water kept rising. Next came a fire truck. The busy workers used their loud speakers to instruct us to exit our vehicles, but left before we could do so. I climbed out of the window and got to the side walk and started walking slowly back toward my apartment in extremely cold rain. I had not walked long when a van pulled up beside me and offered me

⁶ A 1:41 clip of this part of "The Finale" can be viewed at < https://youtu.be/zPnK0NCn_MQ>

⁷ Ibid.

shelter. I had no idea who the person was and frankly I did not care. I was happy to receive this surprise blessing. My help came not as expected from the person with a taller vehicle than mine or the emergency personnel, but rather from an elderly woman.⁸

That experience taught me or rather it reminded me that “in God’s Empire, things get turned upside down so that receiving aid is as much a blessing as giving it.”⁹

I have given you three meanings of this parable from among so many. I could stop now and most of you would feel quite challenged. I fear, however, that a few of you would walk away feeling self-righteous trusting in your track record of many years of both giving and receiving help as well as an openness to seeing God’s realm appear in unexpected ways and through unexpected people.

And so, in closing, I offer a fourth possible meaning – one certain to challenge us all. David Henson, an Episcopalian priest and journalist, suggests that the parable teaches us that we are called to learn from our enemies.

As people of privilege we tend to be uncomfortable receiving help much less learning from people we have fashioned into our cultural enemies. You know . . . the people that in your worst moments you refer to by derogatory names. Our Samaritans are many and varied. For some these include anyone on the other end of the political spectrum, certain religions or certain ways people practice their religions, and even lifestyle choices.

And yet God knows that our othering of another person is really a way of distancing ourselves. Jesus invites us to take the time to meet them where they are and to really listen to their stories expecting that they have something to teach us.¹⁰

In this morning’s parable – the one with the wildly unbelievable and even oxymoronic title – Jesus is teaching important lessons about the kingdom of God. Surely you have heard them. Will you live them?
Amen.

⁸ This event happened while I was in graduate school at Logsdon Seminary at Hardin-Simmons University, which is located in Abilene, Texas.

⁹ Charles McCullough. *The Art of Parables: Reinterpreting the Teaching Stories of Jesus in Word & Sculpture* (Copper House, 2008), p.58.

¹⁰ David Henson. “Jesus Doesn’t Want You to be a Good Samaritan.”

<<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2013/07/jesus-doesnt-want-you-to-be-a-good-samaritan-lectionary-reflection-for-proper-10c/>>